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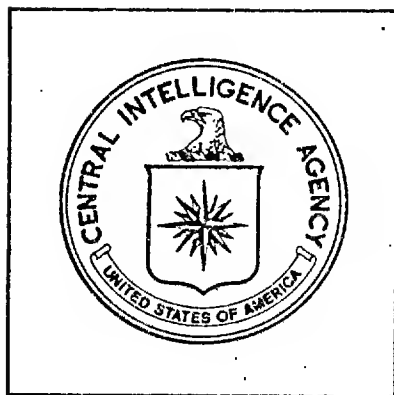
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*Flexibility in Soviet Offensive Concepts:
The Roles of Armor and Other Ground Forces*

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SR RP 75-4
July 1975

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
July 1975

RESEARCH PAPER

Flexibility in Soviet Offensive Concepts:
The Roles of Armor and Other Ground Forces

Preface

The arms reduction negotiations between NATO and the Warsaw Pact have focused renewed attention on the balance of forces in Central Europe. In this area, Western defense officials have been concerned by the size of Pact armored forces and the threat they pose to NATO. This concern has grown as Pact armored forces--already the world's largest--continue to increase in size and quality. This paper surveys the evolution of the basic types of units in the Soviet armored forces, how they are structured, and how they are to be used in the event of war.

The information on which this report is based comes from a variety of sources, some sensitive and not explicitly cited. Basic armor doctrine and tactics are reflected, however, in unclassified Soviet writings as well as in numerous defector reports and exercises.

Comments and queries regarding this publication are welcome. They may be directed to of the Theater Forces Division, Office of Strategic Research, code 143, extension .

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Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Summary	3
The Offensive Imperative and Implication for Armored Forces	5
Early Organization and Tactics	8
Armor in the Era of Massive Nuclear Response	9
Growing Concern for Flexibility and Conventional Capability	12
Overcoming Enemy Antitank Systems	16
Soviet Combined-Arms Concept for the Offensive Breakthrough	18
Tank Forces in a Modern Offensive	21

Illustrations

Changing Soviet Ground Force Organizational Patterns (<i>Chart</i>)	10
Soviet Concept of Ground Offensive in Nuclear War (<i>Diagram</i>)	12
New Soviet Self-Propelled Artillery (<i>Photographs</i>)	14
Probable Soviet Concept of Movement by Tank and Combined-Arms Armies of Wartime Front (<i>Diagrams</i>)	19
Soviet Infantry Attack Supported by BMP Infantry Combat Vehicles (<i>Photograph</i>)	20
Conceptual Meeting Engagement in a Breakthrough (<i>Diagram</i>)	23

Summary

Soviet military planning in the nuclear era used to be based on the assumption that any war with NATO would be nuclear from the outset. Since the late sixties, however, Soviet operational concepts and weapon developments have reflected increasing stress on flexibility for nuclear or conventional war. The flexibility policy has occasioned some change in the expected combat role of armored forces, but that role is essentially the same in either type of conflict. And the Soviet tank force remains the largest in the world--a status which appears to be the result of several factors, including the offensive focus of Soviet land warfare doctrine as well as economic and institutional momentum.

Because their weapons and tactics had earlier been intended mainly for nuclear war, the Soviets had to deal with certain basic considerations in adapting to a policy of flexibility for conventional war:

- They could no longer rely exclusively on nuclear weapons to achieve the breakthrough in NATO defenses which must precede a massive offensive into enemy territory, a basic tenet of Soviet land warfare doctrine.
- NATO capabilities for stopping a conventional attack increased significantly with the proliferation of more effective antitank weapons.
- The massed forces required to create a breakthrough in NATO defenses during the conventional phase of a war would present a tempting target for the sudden introduction of nuclear weapons by the NATO forces, particularly if the breakthrough attempt were meeting with success.

The Soviets have taken steps over the past several years to compensate for these problems:

- The combined-arms tactics (and, to some extent, the more balanced force structure) which emerged in Soviet ground forces during World War II have been reemphasized with the return to conventional war planning.

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- The number of tanks in the infantry arm of the ground forces has been increased.
- Artillery forces have been enlarged and improved as additional guns and new self-propelled artillery have been introduced into the force.
- The ground attack capabilities of the tactical air forces have been upgraded as aircraft with greater conventional payloads have entered service.
- In military exercises the Soviets continually rehearse tactics to maintain a dispersed posture during the conventional phase of a war for as long as possible before concentrating for a breakthrough of enemy defenses.

In attempting to break through well-prepared enemy defenses without the use of nuclear weapons, present Soviet doctrine calls for the assaulting forces to concentrate much of their artillery and combined-arms forces--primarily motorized rifle divisions--opposite a narrow sector of the defensive front. After an extensive artillery barrage, the combined-arms elements would be committed to secure a breach in the defenses through which large tank units would advance.

Because of the Soviets' commitment to tank warfare--underscored when they recently started large-scale production of a new generation of tanks--it is likely that Soviet offensive doctrine will continue to be based on large tank forces. The main impact of changes in land warfare policy has been, and probably will continue to be, on the equipment and tactics of the supporting arms.

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